



CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Mr. Tony Gallagher
Editor
The Times
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**RE: *The Times*’ “Undercover Operation” — Journalistic
Malpractice in the Service of Religious Bigotry**

Dear Mr. Gallagher,

***The Times* has crossed a serious line.**

Your reporter, Tom Ball, entered a Church of Scientology under a fabricated identity. He invented a personal history. He falsely represented himself as a teacher. He enrolled in a religious service while pretending to seek its personal spiritual benefit. He signed a written declaration stating that he was participating in good faith, of his own volition, for his personal benefit and for no other purpose. When directly challenged as to whether he was a journalist, he denied it. He secretly recorded people who trusted the identity and purpose he had presented to them.

He then used the access obtained through those calculated falsehoods to produce an “undercover investigation” whose central purpose and effect was to make ordinary participation in Scientology religious life appear sinister.

That is journalistic malpractice in the service of religious bigotry.

The Times must now account for its own conduct.

It must also confront the consequences of that conduct. Within hours of publication, the Church was vandalised after having placed its premises under overnight watch because of the immediate risk of hostility created by the inflammatory nature of the coverage.

And since publication, *The Times*’ own *podcast* has supplied the evidence that makes immediate editorial action unavoidable.

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THE TIMES TURNED A DEAD END INTO AN “UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATION”

Before Ball embarked upon his deception, anti-Scientologist Amir Essalhi had already supplied him with the material on which *The Times*’ “investigation” was based, including photographs and screenshots.

Essalhi had already taken his material to Police Scotland. The matter was closed for lack of evidence.

Ball then went to Police Scotland himself and was told that no wrongdoing had been established. Essalhi subsequently gave Ball the material he had supplied to police. Only then, Ball says, did he decide to go undercover.

That chronology destroys the mythology *The Times* constructed around its supposed undercover revelation.

The material was already in *The Times*’ hands.

It had already been taken to the police. No wrongdoing had been established.

Then came the fake identity. Then came the invented biography. Then came the false profession. Then came the false written declaration of religious purpose. Then came the secret recordings.

The deception did not lead *The Times* to the story.

The story *The Times* had already decided to pursue led it to the deception.

That distinction goes to the heart of the journalistic misconduct here.

BALL SYSTEMATICALLY DECEIVED A CHURCH

Ball did not merely withhold his occupation. He became “Tom Harris.” He said he was a teacher. He created a false personal history. He presented himself as a genuine participant in a Scientology religious service.

He put his purported purpose in writing, expressly stating that he was participating in good faith for his own personal benefit and for no other purpose. *The Times* was reminded of that document before publication.

When questioned directly about journalism, he denied being a journalist.

And when recounting the operation afterwards, Ball himself described the need to keep his **“backstory straight.”**

His own account also reveals how the method was selected.

Ball says he considered attempting to enter through Church staff channels, but that doing so would have entailed “far more invasive vetting, a lot more questions, and would have taken a lot more time.” Essalhi suggested instead that he purchase a religious course.

In other words, Ball selected the avenue that subjected his false identity to less scrutiny.

He then exploited the trust attached to religious participation to obtain access that truthful disclosure would not have secured.

The IPSO Editors’ Code of Practice does not license deception merely because deception is useful to a reporter. Clause 10 provides that misrepresentation and subterfuge can be justified only in the public interest and only where the material cannot be obtained by other means.

So *The Times* must answer the question its own published record now makes unavoidable:

What material fact of public interest did Tom Ball obtain through this elaborate deception that *The Times* did not already possess and which could not have been obtained by legitimate journalistic means?

That requires an answer.

Not an assertion that *The Times* “stands by” its journalism. Not a general invocation of public interest.

An answer.

THE DECEPTION SERVED A CAMPAIGN OF RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY

What emerged from this operation was not the exposure of wrongdoing.

It was the construction of a narrative in which the religious life of Scientologists—particularly young Scientologists—was systematically presented through a vocabulary of suspicion.

Young people participate in the life of their religions throughout Britain.

They serve in parishes. They help in mosques. They participate in synagogue activities. They assist at temples and gurdwaras. They study, volunteer, organise, help others and take responsibility within the religious communities in which they are raised.

Young Scientologists do the same.

Before publication, the Church told *The Times* explicitly:

“Naturally, children are involved in the life of places of worship in every religion present in Scotland. We are no different.”

We also made clear that such participation takes place within all applicable legal and safeguarding requirements.

The Times took that ordinary reality and transformed it into: “Revealed: how Scientology recruits children as ‘staff’.”

That was not merely a headline choice.

It was the governing premise of the entire exercise.

Throughout the coverage, Scientology religious life was stripped of its religious meaning and redescribed through deliberately prejudicial secular language. Religious participation became recruitment. Volunteering became suspicious. Religious practices were converted into hostile caricatures. Children became the emotional instrument through which the Church itself was made to appear dangerous.

The technique is clear: remove the religious context, substitute a pejorative description, repeat it under the authority of an “undercover investigation”, and invite the reader to regard Scientology itself as evidence of something suspect.

This is precisely how religious prejudice is manufactured.

And there is no ambiguity as to Scientology’s status as a religion in this country. In 2013, the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom unanimously held that Scientology comes within the meaning of religion and that its chapel is a place of meeting for religious worship. In reaching that conclusion, the Court rejected a narrow definition of religion, recognising that such an approach would itself produce religious discrimination. The judgment embodies a principle that could scarcely be more relevant here: minority religions are not to be denied equal treatment because their beliefs or practices differ from those of religions more familiar to the majority.

That makes what *The Times* has done still more egregious. It took the religious life of a faith recognised by the highest court in the United Kingdom and subjected it to a standard of suspicion that would be immediately recognisable as prejudicial if applied to another religion.

Would *The Times* infiltrate a mosque under a fabricated identity and build a national exposé around teenagers helping there?

Would it secretly record worshippers in a synagogue and portray Jewish teenagers undertaking responsibilities in their religious community as the objects of sinister “recruitment”?

Would regular participation by young Catholics in parish life become an undercover investigation into children being drawn into Church “staff”?

The Times made the religion of these young people the reason its readers were instructed to regard their participation with suspicion.

That is not merely slanted journalism.

It is religious bigotry.

***THE TIMES* GAVE AN ANTI-SCIENTOLOGY CAMPAIGN THE FALSE AUTHORITY OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM**

There is another serious journalistic failure.

Ball’s source did not merely answer questions. By Ball’s own account, Essalhi supplied the material and suggested the means by which Ball could obtain covert access to the Church.

The sequence is stark:

- the anti-Scientologist supplied the material,
- the anti-Scientologist proposed the route of infiltration,
- the reporter fabricated the identity,
- the reporter executed the deception,
- and *The Times* supplied a monetised campaign of religious hostility with the institutional authority and national platform of one of Britain’s leading newspapers.

The words “undercover investigation” then gave readers the impression of independent first-hand discovery.

But Ball’s own podcast demonstrates that the story had already been supplied to him before he ever entered the Church.

Indeed, when asked whether he had personally witnessed one of the coverage's most sensationalised matters, Ball acknowledged:

“I didn’t see any of it myself.”

That admission exposes the central journalistic sleight of hand.

The undercover operation supplied the appearance of independent verification to an anti-Scientology narrative that had already been placed in Ball's hands.

The result was *The Times* lending its institutional authority to the propagation of religious prejudice.

THE TIMES MUST WITHDRAW THE MATERIAL NOW

The harm is no longer hypothetical.

Within hours of publication, the Church was vandalised.

Police attended the premises, took a full statement and formally recorded the vandalism as a police incident.

The Times is therefore now on formal notice that the hostility the Church feared has already materialised.

Any decision to continue publishing or promoting this inflammatory material will be a fresh editorial decision made with knowledge of what has already occurred and of the risk of further harm.

The appropriate remedy is not a clarification, an editor's note or a cosmetic amendment.

The appropriate remedy is withdrawal.

We therefore require *The Times* to immediately withdraw the principal article, Ball's accompanying first-person account and the associated podcast from publication, and cease their further distribution and promotion.

Withdraw the material before further harm occurs.

We expect immediate confirmation that you have done so.

Sincerely,

Graeme Wilson
Director of Public Affairs